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Everyday Strategies of Rural Migrants: Assembling Skills in *Mala tang* Production

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Abstract

This article aims to show the value of viewing migration through the lens of skill, by considering the case study of a restaurant selling *mala tang*, a Sichuanese hotpot-like noodle soup. Inspired by the German anthropologist Gerd Spittler's concept of "work," the skills needed to work in a *mala tang* restaurant are analysed. Data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork in 2007/08 in a restaurant run by rural migrants from Anhui in urban Shanghai. The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the research on food and migration, by focusing on migrant work and related skills, and to add the aspect of fast food prepared in informal street restaurants by rural migrants to the corpus of research on the Shanghainese culinary landscape. It is argued that focusing on the everyday strategies of migrants, and particularly on the work and (food-) skills of these migrants, provides a useful perspective through which to gain an in-depth understanding of migration processes. These include migrants' agency, migrants' motivations, the organisation of their migration process and

everyday lives, and the overall dynamic of the migration process.

Keywords: *mala tang*, food and migration, everyday strategies, skill, Shanghai

農村移民的日常生活策略：烹調麻辣燙的綜合技能

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摘　要

此篇論文主旨在以麻辣燙小吃店的個案研究，顯示透過謀生技能的角度來理解移民之研究視角的價值。麻辣燙是四川地區類似火鍋的湯麵。此篇從德國人類學家 Gerd Spittler 對於「工作」的定義出發，分析在麻辣燙餐廳工作所需的技能。田野資料為 2007 與 2008 年，在一間由安徽農村移民在上海市區所開的麻辣燙餐廳所蒐集到的。此研究的目的，試圖從移民的工作與相關技能，填補飲食與移民研究間的空白；此外，也希望透過研究農村移民在街頭經營的小吃，增加吾人對上海飲食文化的認識。本文的一個重要論點為：觀察移民的生計，尤其是打工與炊事技能，能更深刻地了解移民過程，包括移民能動性、移民動機、移民過程的組織、移民的日常生活，以及移民過程的整體動力。

關鍵字：麻辣燙、飲食與移民、日常生活策略、工作技能、上海

Ⅰ. Introduction and Background[1]

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the field of food and migration within anthropology and the social sciences. This is a rather small and young, but nevertheless very dynamic, research field. Two notable activities have contributed greatly to establishing the anthropological study of food and migration: a SOAS workshop entitled "Food and Migration"[2] and a special edition of *Anthropology of Food*.[3] Building on previous contributions,[4] they have enhanced knowledge around topics including questions of identity, authenticity, nostalgia and memory, images of place, the present and past, health and gender, as well as the role of food in constructing and affirming migrants' social

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1 This article draws on the author's revised master thesis, published as: Lena Kaufmann, *Mala tang – Alltagsstrategien ländlicher Migranten in Shanghai* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011). The author wishes to thank the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, the German Academic Exchange Service, the Chinese Scholarship Council, and the Marie Heim-Vögtlin programme of the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding of research and/or publication, as well as Jong Bum Kwon and Carrie M. Lane for sharing their manuscript with me, and the anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments which helped to improve this article.

2 SOAS University of London, Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies, "Workshop: Food and Migration," (2009) https://www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora/seminarsevents/02feb2009- workshop-food-and-migration.html (accessed on 2015/5/7).

3 Chantal Crenn, Jean Pierre Hassoun and Xavier Medina, ed., *Migrations, pratiques alimentaires et rapports sociaux: Quand continuité n'est pas reproduction, discontinuité n'est pas rupture*. Special edition of Anthropology of Food 7 (2010) (online journal), http://aof.revues.org/6515 (accessed on 2015/5/7).

4 E.g. Manuel Calvo, "Migration et Alimentation," *Social Science Information* 21 (1982): 383-446; David E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Anne J. Kershen, ed., *Food in the Migrant Experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002).

relationships. Moreover, they have highlighted the dynamic and hybrid character of different cuisines and the fluid borders between societies and their foods.

Nevertheless, there are several aspects of the field of food and migration that deserve further attention, especially the case of internal migrants, which is still poorly understood – possibly due to the implicit assumption that internal migrants and their host communities share similar foodways and identities. However, in a country as vast and diverse as the People's Republic of China, enormous inter-regional variations may be observed.

Secondly, even though Chinese food and migration abroad and partly within (greater) China have been the focus of some scholars' work,[5] generally China has not been a region with much research into the food and migration field, so further studies are urgently needed.

Thirdly, most papers on food and migration concentrate solely on the migrant community and its food, exploring issues such as changes in migrants' food systems caused by migration. At the same time, most studies revolve around the (often domestic) realm of food consumption. However, with more than two thirds of the global migrants employed in

[5] See e.g. David Y. H. Wu and Chee-Beng Tan, ed., *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001); David Y. H. Wu and Sydney C. H. Cheung, eds., *The Globalization of Chinese Food* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the service sector, including catering,[6] food production is a major activity for migrants around the world. Migrants cater not only for their own communities, but they also create dishes for their host communities. This is an aspect that only seems to have appeared on the research agenda recently, in a growing body of literature on migrant restaurants and (super)markets,[7] so this calls for a closer analysis.

Finally, considering that many migrants work in the catering sector, it is surprising that few studies have taken any in-depth look at the actual "work" (as defined by the German anthropologist Gerd Spittler) of these migrants, and on the skills needed to perform this work. These not only include cooking skills, but also skills in preserving, transporting, acquiring, imitating, or adjusting certain ingredients. Furthermore, they embrace a whole range of related social skills, including mastering table manners, as well as the specific roles or privileges that accompany the possession of certain skills. They also comprise the skills of eating a healthy diet (or the lack of these skills in a migratory situation) and entrepreneurial skills. Although food-related skills are sometimes mentioned in a range of articles about food and migration, they are usually mentioned rather

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6 International Labour Office, *ILO Global Estimates of Migrant Workers and Migrant Domestic Workers: Results and Methodology* (Geneva: ILO, 2015), 8.

7 See e.g. Gillian Crowther, *Eating Culture: An Anthropological Guide to Food* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 196-206; as well as contributions in Anne J. Kershen, ed., *Food in the Migrant Experience*; David Beriss and David Sutton, eds., *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007); Chantal Crenn, Jean Pierre Hassoun and Xavier Medina, ed., *Migrations, pratiques alimentaires et rapports sociaux: Quand continuité n'est pas reproduction, discontinuité n'est pas rupture*.

marginally, and there seems to be almost no explicit analysis of food-related skills of migrants.

The empirical findings that are presented in this article suggest that (food-related) skills play an important role in structuring and organising the migratory process and the everyday working life of migrant workers in this process. Therefore, I argue that focusing on the everyday strategies of migrant workers – and particularly on the work and skills of these migrants – provides a useful way to gain an in-depth understanding of migration processes.

Hence, this article aims to answer the question: what role do food-related skills play in structuring and organising the migratory process and the everyday working life of migrant workers in this process? In addition, the article will also consider: what do the skills of a group of internal migrants working in the Chinese catering sector consist of? and: what is the benefit of focusing on the work of migrants and, more specifically, on the skills needed to do this work?

Answers to these questions are provided through a case study that examines the skills involved in producing and selling a hotpot-like, spicy noodle soup called *mala tang*.

Moreover, by providing a qualitative case study of migrants' work in the catering sector, this paper aims to enhance empirical knowledge regarding mainland Chinese rural to urban migration in general, and of food and migration in China in particular. Finally, it also contributes a description of a fast food prepared and sold by rural migrants in informal restaurants to the picture of the current Shanghainese culinary landscape,

which has been so richly described in its historical context by the historian Mark Swislocki.[8]

A. The Locality Chosen and Research Methods Applied

This article is based on ethnographic field research conducted mainly in the city of Shanghai and partly in rural Anhui province, between March 2007 and April 2008. The research location was a *mala tang* shop just outside the border of the former French concession in Shanghai's centrally-located Xuhui District, run by five related family members from rural Anhui and apprentices. After this particular *mala tang* shop was demolished when Shanghai prepared to host the EXPO 2010,[9] the shop owners have continued to run *mala tang* shops in varying family constellations in other parts of the city.

Focusing on the work of rural migrants, I chose a field site that fulfilled three conditions: Firstly, it was the working place of rural migrants in Shanghai; secondly, it was accessible to a foreigner; and thirdly, it was near to my room in Shanghai Jiaotong University to allow regular field visits, because due to the limited space it was not possible for me to sleep at the field site.

Apart from less frequent follow-up visits between 2008 and 2011, in 2007 and 2008 I visited the family in their restaurant(s) on 101 days or

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[8] Mark Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[9] The EXPO 2010 was a major international fair. It was held in Shanghai from 1 May to 31 October 2010 under the theme "Better City – Better Life."

nights (each a time of about half an hour to five hours, sometimes also longer), in addition to taking part in delivery tours on 48 days, and spending 10 days in the family's rural home in Huaining County in Anhui.

The main methods were participant observation, which allowed me to explore the tacit, embodied culinary knowledge of the restaurant owners, as well as accompanying semi-structured interviews and informal conversations in Chinese (*putonghua* 普通話) lasting from some minutes to two hours. This method proved the most effective way of verbal exchange, because, as the family members had barely spare time, the interviews could be conducted during their work. Together, the methods allow gaining an in-depth insight into migrant work from migrants' perspectives.

Furthermore, customers were interviewed and observed almost at every occasion during their meals and delivery, and fellow villagers were interviewed in the restaurant studied or in their own restaurants. Altogether I visited 20 *mala tang* restaurants, including restaurants of strangers to the family.[10]

B. A Useful Approach to Studying Everyday Strategies: Gerd Spittler's Concept of Work

In order to explore the question of what role do food-related skills play in structuring and organising the migratory process and the everyday working

[10] For a discussion of the methods and a detailed list of interviewees, times, and locations see Lena Kaufmann, *Mala tang – Alltagsstrategien ländlicher Migranten in Shanghai*, 10-12, 96-104.

life of migrant workers, it is valuable to take a closer look at the concept of "work," according to the definition of the German anthropologist Gerd Spittler.[11]

In a basic sense, "work" can be defined as a continuous activity extant in all human societies that aims to produce goods or services.[12] However, social scientists and anthropologists, including Spittler,[13] have reminded us that work should be defined more broadly than in terms of an income and market-oriented gainful employment, since work is embedded in society and therefore also has a social dimension.[14]

While social scientists have included this social aspect in their analyses, the technical component of work is often ignored, even though technical and social aspects go hand in hand. To do justice to both faces, Spittler analytically distinguishes between work as a technique and work

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[11] Gerd Spittler is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, a key figure in the field of the anthropology of work. He has studied peasants, nomads and herders in Niger, Nigeria and Algeria. See: University of Bayreuth, "Prof. Dr. em. Gerd Spittler," (2014), http://www.ethnologie.uni-bayreuth.de/de/team/Emeriti/Spittler_Gerd/index.html, accessed on 2015/5/7.

[12] Gerd Spittler, "Work, Anthropological Aspects," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Elsevier 2001), 16565-8.

[13] *Ibid*.; Gerd Spittler, *Anthropologie der Arbeit: Ein ethnographischer Vergleich* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).

[14] For recent conceptual works in the field see, e.g., Marek Korczinski, Randy Hodson and Paul K. Edwards, eds., *Social Theory at Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Steven Vallas, William Finlay and Amy Wharton, *The Sociology of Work: Structures and Inequalities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Marek Korczinski and Cameron McDonald, eds., *Service Work: Critical perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2009); John W. Budd, *The Thought of Work* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2011); Jong Bum Kwon and Carrie M. Lane, eds., *Anthropologies of Unemployment: New Perspectives on Work and Its Absence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

as an action, while focusing on the performance at work, i.e. on how work is actually *done*.[15]

Spittler's approach not only allows us to overcome simple dualisms between work and life;[16] it also draws attention to the skills needed for working. Skill[17] – roughly described as mostly tacit and embodied social and technical competences – is necessary, and thus constitutive for work, especially under conditions of scarce technical equipment. A large part of the skills needed for work have been acquired in and are needed in everyday life as well.[18] However, every type of work also requires specialised skills, acquired in the course of the training and working process. This may seem trivial at first sight. However, studies on work tend to overlook this aspect, even though a focus on skill is a highly promising approach for an analysis of the everyday strategies of migrant workers and for understanding migration through the lens of skill. In this article, "everyday strategies" refers to the strategies which migrants deliberately employ to master their everyday lives. Without offering a definition of strategy, the term is used here mainly to highlight the conscious and purposeful goal orientation that is assumed to underlie migrants' actions.

Migrants' everyday lives usually take place under certain constraints, such as discriminating policies and limited access to resources (e.g. money,

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15 Gerd Spittler, *Anthropologie der Arbeit: Ein ethnographischer Vergleich*, 19, 21, 233.

16 *Ibid*., 4.

17 See Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000); mentioned under IV. F.

18 Gerd Spittler, *Anthropologie der Arbeit: Ein ethnographischer Vergleich*, 19, 21.

education and welfare services). Hence, skills are needed and strategically employed to overcome or deal with these constraints and to cope with everyday life in general.[19] One central activity in which these skills are concentrated is the realm of work. Here, Spittler's elaborations on work and his actor-based perspective provide a helpful basis for analysis, as they draw our attention to the equal importance of the social and the technical sides of work, including the actor's body as it interacts with the social and the material world.

Ⅱ. The Case Study: *Mala tang* – Steps in Preparation, and Consumers

Before analysing the skills that are needed in *mala tang* production and the role that these skills may play in the migration process, a few words about the dish *mala tang* 麻辣燙[20] and the consumers of this dish are indispensable.

Roughly speaking, *mala tang* is a type of spicy noodle soup or hotpot that has its origins in Sichuan cuisine. Even though it is considered a fast food snack, it may also replace a proper meal. The soup consists of a spicy

[19] Ethnographic evidence from my current dissertation project on rice farming and migration suggests that with regard to their rural households, migrating household members often have special skills. However, this needs further investigation.

[20] In this paper, *pinyin* is used as a system of phonetic transcription. The characters *ma* 麻 and *la* 辣 refer to different types of spiciness. Whereas *ma* implies a numb and tingling sensation that may be felt when tasting Sichuan pepper, *la* points towards a hot, sharp and biting spiciness such as that felt when eating chillies. *Tang* 燙 stands for "very hot" or "boiling hot" and is also the verb used to mean cooking *mala tang*.

broth to which various ingredients are added and boiled (*tang*).

The preparation of *mala tang* consists of four different steps: frying spices, preparing the broth, adding and boiling extra flavours, then adding toppings.

The first step (frying spices) is crucial for the taste and, partly, also for the success of the restaurant. According to an Indonesian apprentice[21] in the restaurant under study – the boss was understandably reluctant to share his knowledge –, the basis (*diliao* 底料) of *mala tang* is made by frying "20 to 30" different crushed spices in oil, including chillies, Sichuan pepper (*huajiao* 花椒), black pepper, ginger, garlic, star anise, thick broad-bean sauce (*douban* 豆瓣), Amomum tsaoko (*caoguo* 騲果), Chinese cinnamon (*guipi* 桂皮) and cloves (*dingxiang* 丁香).

In the second step (preparing the broth), a ladle of the spicy mix is placed into a net in a large pot containing water in which pork rind has been boiled, as well as large quantities of salt and MSG. It is heated over a gas flame that allows for rapid temperature adjustment.

In the third step (adding and boiling extra flavours), various ingredients and noodles are boiled inside a net. The net prevents different customers' food choices from being mixed up during the boiling process. In the restaurant under study, more than 60 types of add-ins are served, including vegetables, algae, soybean products, and meat and fish balls. These are placed on skewers for customers to choose and hand to the cook

[21] Information given by an Indonesian apprentice of Chinese origin, recorded in field notes (FN), p. 20, on 2007/7/14.

in a small basket. The skewers are taken apart before boiling. Towards the end of the boiling process, different types of instant noodles (*fangbian mian* 方便麵) and/or starch noodles (*fensi* 粉絲) are added.

In the final step (adding toppings), the cook takes out the net with the boiled soup add-ins and places them in a bowl. Some broth is ladled on top, and, according to the customer's taste, vinegar, ground chillies and ground Sichuan pepper are sprinkled on top. Some restaurants may also offer fancier toppings such as peanut sauce, sesame sauce, or industrially-produced and packaged rice crust (*guoba* 鍋巴). Finally, *mala tang* is consumed with the help of chop-sticks, and sometimes a spoon, accompanied by diners' audible slurping and snuffling.

In the restaurant studied, *mala tang* is consumed by different people and for various reasons. On the one hand, for people on a lower income, such as students and migrant workers, *mala tang* is an affordable way of eating out. With their flexible opening hours, the *mala tang* restaurant also directly caters to the needs of late night workers. On the other hand, *mala tang* is also eaten by Shanghainese and people with higher incomes, who, according to both producers and customers, often enjoy the soup as a late-night snack, and they frequently express a craving for the spicy soup when their appetite for heavier food is suppressed by the damp summer heat. Finally, some consumers appreciate *mala tang* as a quick meal.

Ⅲ. The Case Study: *Mala tang* Restaurant Owners – the Socio-economic and Wider Context of Work

According to my observations, the owners of *mala tang* restaurants in Shanghai are typically migrant workers. Interestingly, even though *mala tang* has "migrated" from Sichuan province to the cities of the Chinese east coast and, although many shop signs read: "authentic Sichuan *mala tang*," *mala tang* producers in Shanghai often seem to come from Anhui province nearby. In 2006, it was estimated that one quarter to one third of Shanghai's population consisted of rural migrants, most of who came from Anhui province.[22] According to the 2010 census, 77.6 per cent of all interprovincial migrants from Anhui had migrated to the Yangtze River Delta around Shanghai, where almost one quarter worked in the sales and service sector, including the restaurant industry.[23]

A. From Rice Farming to *Mala tang* Production

The informants of this research are migrant workers who moved from rural Anhui to run a small *mala tang* restaurant in Shanghai. They are all related:

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[22] Zai Liang, "Internal Migration: Policy Changes, Recent Trends and New Challenges," in *Transition and Challenge: China's Population at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, edited by Zhongwei Zhao and Fei Guo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201; Zhu Guodong 朱國棟, Liu Hong 劉紅 and Chen Zhiqiang 陳志強, *Shanghai Yimin* 上海移民 (*Shanghai's Immigrants*) (Shanghai: Caijing Daxue, 2008), 22.

[23] Zai Liang, Zhen Li and Zhongdong Ma, "Changing Patterns of the Floating Population in China, 2000–2010," *Population and Development Review* 40 (2014): 713; see also Wang Feng, Xuejin Zuo and Danching Ruan, "Rural Migrants in Shanghai: Living under the Shadow of Socialism," *The International Migration Review* 36 (2002): 529.

the boss, Wu Jianguo, his wife Li Cuiping, his 18 year old daughter Wu Guilian, his younger sister Wu Jianhua, and her husband, Wang Weidong.[24] Each couple has also a young child attending school in their hometown.

Wu Jianguo, born in 1966, and his younger sister Wu Jianhua grew up in a small rice farming village that has about 200 inhabitants today. One of their parents had bad eyesight and the other was blind, and the family was so poor that they sometimes even had to beg for food. Nevertheless, the parents managed to afford six years of elementary education for their son.[25] Later on, Mr. Wu became a rice farmer. His sister Wu Jianhua did not attend school and started to work as a street vendor in various provinces at the age of 15.[26]

In 1994, Mr. Wu abandoned farming and tried his luck as a wood worker in Jilin province, together with his brother-in-law.[27] As this was not a lucrative job, in 1999 Mr. Wu moved to Shanghai to open up a small *mala tang* restaurant. He was aware that some fellow villagers had already successfully opened up *mala tang* shops in Shanghai and other big cities, and had acquired beautiful new houses and higher social standing in the village.[28]

A fellow villager and distant male relative on the side of Mr. Wu's father served as a model and master (*shifu* 師傅), and Mr. Wu became his

[24] All of the names are pseudonyms.
[25] Li Cuiping, 2007/10/29 (FN, 238); Wu Jianhua, 2007/11/6 (FN, 247).
[26] Wu Jianhua, 2007/5/23 (FN, 81); Wu Jianhua, 2007/11/6 (FN, 247).
[27] Wu Jianguo, 2008/2/8 (FN, 340).
[28] Wu Guilan, 2008/2/7 (FN, 339).

apprentice (*tudi* 徒弟). This relative had opened up a shop in Shanghai ten years before. He was the first person in the village who had learned to prepare *mala tang*, from somebody in a nearby village.[29]

The most difficult part at the beginning, however, was not learning how to cook *mala tang*, but to find a good but affordable business location. According to Mr. Wu, it only takes a few hours or days to learn how to prepare *mala tang,*[30] but it may take months to find a suitable shop. Therefore, many families follow the same strategy as him, whereby the head of the family migrates first, living with and learning from fellow villagers whilst looking for suitable premises.[31] When Mr. Wu finally found a well-situated shop in Xuhui district, surrounded by two hospitals, a university, shopping centres and hotel restaurants, his family members joined one by one. He had borrowed money from fellow villagers to buy his basic equipment.[32] After months of hard work, the shop had grown enough to employ Mr. Wu, his wife, sister, brother-in-law, daughter, and a paternal aunt. Mr. Wu was then also able to take on apprentices, who would help out in the shop for several weeks.

In Han Chinese society, the family is organised patrilineally, and this affects the way that knowledge is distributed and tasks are allocated within the family. A patrilineal system implies that women marry out of their own relatives and become part of the husband's family. At home, Mr. Wu

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[29] Li Cuiping and relative, 2007/2/3 (FN, 331).

[30] Wu Jianguo, 2008/10/24 (FN, 398).

[31] Wang Weidong, 2008/3/18 (FN, 380); female apprentice (Li Cuiping's 2.eBWeBD), 2008/10/24 (FN, 398); Wu Jianguo, 2008/10/24 (FN, 398).

[32] Wu Guilan, 2008/2/7 (FN, 339f).

and his younger sister Wu Jianhua followed this pattern. In the migration situation, however, brother and sister lived together again. This situation created substantial family tensions, especially between the two sisters-in-law. In addition, the working relationship was defined in such a way that Mr. Wu was pronounced boss of the restaurant, whereas his sister and her husband were only "working for the boss" (*da gong* 打工). This meant having less decision-making power and earning a monthly wage that Wu Jianhua perceived as much too low.[33]

B. The Spatial Organisation of the *Mala tang* Restaurant

The shop has two floors, each about forty-five metres square. The restaurant is located on the ground floor, and the bedrooms on the top floor. Both working and living spheres are closely inter-related. Because of the lack of space, some activities also take place outside.

The ground floor with two main rooms can be opened out completely towards the street, revealing the cooking area and shelves with skewers. Towards the back is the dining room, providing space for a maximum of 18 customers on two long tables. This room is also used for making skewers, receiving telephone orders, storing food, consuming family meals and receiving guests. Private cooking is done on a coal-heated stove outside the back door.

The second floor is separated into three sleeping spaces: one for each couple and one bed in the corridor for the daughter. In between are stored

[33] Wu Jianhua, 2008/2/4 (FN, 333); Wang Weidong, 2008/3/18 (FN, 380).

boxes of noodles, spices and oil. The allocation of the different-sized and quality bedrooms reflects the family hierarchy, which is also replicated in the seating order during family meals, and in the allocation of tasks in the shop.

As the shop and the arrangement of its interior constitute the context of the living and working worlds of the family members, so the specific way that tools and equipment are organised also reflects the skills practiced in this environment.[34]

C. Product Range and Income in the *Mala tang* Restaurant

The monthly net family income derived from selling *mala tang*, after subtracting inputs, living costs and rent, ranges between 4000 and 7000 Yuan RMB.[35]

Income is generated mainly through the different soup add-ins that customers can choose. These are cut into bite-size pieces and stuck on bamboo skewers. The skewers are divided into two, rather loosely understood categories that reflect two different price ranges: meat and sea food products *hun lei* 葷類 (1 Yuan RMB each), and vegetarian products *su lei* 素類 (0.5 Yuan RMB each). Noodles and some soy products count as *hun lei* because of their higher price. Further income is created by selling soft drinks and beer and, from May to September, lobsters (*longxia*

[34] See Charles M. Keller and Janet Dixon Keller, *Cognition and Tool Use: The Blacksmith at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 60-88.

[35] Wang Weidong, 2007/3/29 (FN, 8); Wu Guilian, 2008/08/17 (FN, 141); Wu Jianguo, 2008/10/24 (FN, 397).

龍蝦) boiled in the spicy *mala tang* broth.

Meat, fish and soy products are delivered every day. The big variety of non-vegetarian skewers reflects the customers' preferences, especially those of the wealthier foreign students or doctors from the nearby hospitals.[36] Many of these skewers consist of industrially processed, frozen meat and fish balls with fancy names (see Appendix, Table 1).

In contrast, vegetables and spices are bought at a distant wholesale market, and the actual supply of vegetarian skewers depends on seasonality and market offers (see Table 2).

D. Evaluation of the *Mala tang* Profession in the Eyes of the Restaurant Owners

The evaluation of the *mala tang* profession in the eyes of the shop owners is part of the social component of the work. Their assessments of the work are generally rather negative, but the family members see some positive aspects, too.

With regard to the working activity and condition, the family members describe their work as hard and tiring.[37] Working hours are long and almost without breaks. However, Li Cuiping perceives her former life in the fields as hard work, too.[38] Wu Guilian finds the job "so-so" (*hai keyi* 還可以) and stresses that it grants more freedom than "working for a

[36] Mr. Wu's aunt, 2007/4/30 (FN, 29).
[37] E.g. Wang Weidong, 2007/5/10 (FN, 49), 2007/3/28 (FN, 7), 2007/5/21 (FN, 75).
[38] Li Cuiping, 2007/10/1 (FN, 176), 2007/5/23 (FN, 81).

boss."[39] Mr. Wu's aunt describes making skewers as a job that is "just like you (students) use your brains, tiring and troublesome (*hen mafan* 很麻烦)."[40] However, they very much appreciate the relatively higher standard of living.[41]

These evaluations not only convey an impression of life away from home, but they also reveal the position of the *mala tang* profession in contemporary Chinese society, as perceived by some of its producers. This helps us to understand the working life of a group of migrants through the lens of food production. This insight, along with the other background information provided above, constitutes a backdrop for the following analysis of selected activities and related skills in *mala tang* production.

With regard to the perception of the general working situation in a migratory context, the family's ongoing connections to their ancestral home are highly important. Connections are maintained through activities including frequent expressions of homesickness, discourses on home, the ancestors buried on the family land, the children left behind, investments in house construction, the daily seating arrangements, and the consumption of home-style dishes. Shanghai is clearly not perceived as home.[42]

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39 Wu Guilan, 2007/10/1 (FN, 173).
40 Mr. Wu's aunt, 2007/4/30 (FN, 29).
41 Wang Weidong, 2007/5/12 (FN, 55); Li Cuiping, 2008/2/3 (FN, 330).
42 Wu Jianhua, 2007/12/2 (FN, 277); Wu Jianguo, 2007/10/1 (FN, 177).

Ⅳ. The Case Study: Everyday Strategies – Assembling Skills in *Mala tang* Production

The term "everyday strategies" in this article refers, on a general level, to the strategies employed for mastering everyday life as rural migrants in the city. On a more specific level, it points to the strategic employment of the skills[43] needed to complete the specific tasks in *mala tang* production. These skills – along with factors such as age, gender and status in the family – greatly influence the family division of labour.

The following section is structured in line with five basic tasks in *mala tang* production, and the skills required for these: making skewers, taking orders, cooking *mala tang*, delivering *mala tang*, and producing the mix of spices. There are obviously more activities and skills than these five tasks, for instance, those related to the procurement and preservation of goods with a short shelf-life; the restaurant management, including the coordination of costs and profit; and the identification of market niches and consumer demands. Unfortunately, the boss of the restaurant, who is responsible for these areas, was unwilling to share his insights and no related data could be collected. Due to this reason and the scope of this article, the five activities presented below may be seen as exemplary activities with regard to investigating the question of what role do food-related skills play in structuring and organising the migratory process and the everyday working life of migrant workers.

[43] See IV. F.

Although the activities are described separately below, in daily life they form a constant interplay. The restaurant is open from 10.30 am to 3 am; however, the shop owners actually work in shifts almost all around the clock. Their work also includes domestic chores such as preparing family meals or making laundry, which, of course, also require skills. As these skills are not directly related to the steps of *mala tang* production, they are not discussed below.[44]

Generally, great time pressure underlies most activities. Therefore, to be a skilled *mala tang* producer also requires being able to accomplish the activities in limited time, especially during busy lunch and dinner times.

A. Making Skewers: Dexterity, Patience and Tricks

Making skewers is a basic activity in the *mala tang* profession, and apprenticeship usually begins with this task. It requires both dexterity and patience.

Skewers are usually made by women inside the building, whereas men operate in an outer sphere. Although in everyday life shifts and negotiations between these spaces do occur, at a normative level this "inside"/"outside" dichotomy still seems prevalent in the Chinese countryside today. It operates alongside the divisions between "light" and "heavy" work, and "unskilled" and "skilled" work, which are designated

[44] For a schematic overview of the organisation of a typical working day see table 3 in the appendix.

to women and men respectively.[45] Importantly, "unskilled" and "skilled" refer to a Han-Chinese conception regarding appropriate tasks for women and men respectively, i.e. on a normative-discursive level. The dichotomy does not reflect my understanding of the actual skills, in the sense of an embodied, non-verbal knowledge that is needed for *mala tang* production. Generally, it is precisely this ambivalence that paves the ground for potential negotiations and change at the level of the micro-hierarchy of work and family relations.

Within the *mala tang* restaurant, the normative separations are in fact evident, by confining the female family members' work mainly to the inside, and by evaluating – on a discursive level – their tasks as rather light and unskilled. However, in practice, being assigned to these spheres implies that the women actually do have developed special manual skills in an embodied sense. Concretely, while all the family members know how to make skewers, the older women are especially good and quick at it and, according to Li Cuiping, some products, such as the slippery algae, can only be made by the older women. Her former experience of making cloth shoes,[46] for which she was trained in previous years, provided good preparation for this task.

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[45] Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On a normative level, "unskilled" and "skilled"refer to a Han-Chinese conception regarding appropriate tasks for women and men respectively. The dichotomy does not reflect my understanding of the actual skills, in the sense of an embodied, non-verbal knowledge that is needed for *mala tang* production.

[46] Cf. e.g. Francesca Bray, *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China: Great Transformations Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 2013), 93-120.

Even though Li Cuiping talks about learning how to make skewers in a rather derogatory way, saying that you only need to watch in order to learn, she admits that she has become very quick at it through her daily practice. Mr. Wu's aunt acknowledges that the task is difficult at the beginning, but becomes easy after a while.[47]

The look of the skewers is also important. The skewers need to have an appetising appearance if customers are to choose them, so the women have a repertoire of little tricks allowing them to make the skewers look as big, fresh, and uniform as possible whilst using as few pieces as possible.

Hence, making skewers is not just about placing food on a skewer, but a skill that involves patience, dexterity, speed and a sense of aesthetics.

B. Taking Orders: Special Writing Techniques and More

Knowing how to read and write is important for delivery service, because it allows orders to be accepted by phone. The mastery of this skill directly influences the family division of labour.

In this restaurant, since the boss has to take care of other tasks such as procurement, it is left to his daughter and his brother-in-law to record the telephone orders, because only the two men and the daughter know how to write.

The older women had little or no schooling, so avoid answering the phone. If they are obliged to answer because nobody who can write is

[47] Li Cuiping, 2007/6/16 (FN, 99), 2007/12/26 (FN, 303); Mr. Wu's aunt, 2007/9/28 (FN, 165).

around, Li Cuiping shouts the name of each type of skewer to her sister-in-law, who immediately assembles the order in a basket. The delivery address is either memorised or the customer is asked to call back.

Reading Chinese characters is easier than writing them. Even illiterate Wu Jianhua has learnt how to recognise the basic characters needed in the *mala tang* business. However, reading may also be a challenge. Mr. Wu's aunt refused to deliver *mala tang* for the fear of not being able to read the address. Moreover, she was reluctant to answer the phone, being afraid that her limited standard Chinese would impede her understanding of the customers.[48]

When taking an order, in addition to being literate, it is necessary to know the price of each skewer, to be informed about the availability of each at a particular moment, and to be able to calculate the price while talking to the customer.

Moreover, orders need to be taken under great time pressure, because waiting customers quickly get angry. To save time, the family has developed a specific system of writing order slips. Although it is difficult for outsiders to read, people acquainted with the system can decipher the slips at a glance.

The slips are long and narrow, written from top to bottom. The upper left-hand corner contains an abbreviation of the destination. For instance, "護 20" stands for the nurses' office (*hushi lou* 護士樓) located in the twentieth floor of a nearby hospital.

[48] Li Cuiping talking about Mr. Wu's aunt, 2007/7/20 (FN, 126).

In the lower right-hand corner, the degree of spiciness (little, medium or spicy) and the price are recorded. Additional orders such as drinks, starch noodles, soybeans, vinegar or Sichuan pepper are also noted here.

The central part details the skewers, and their names are frequently abbreviated through different techniques. Lexical abbreviations involve skipping whole characters, as in the example above. Alternatively, an original character may be substituted by a less complex homophone character: e.g., *jin* 巾, ("piece of cloth") may replace *jin* 筋 in the complex *mianjin* 麵筋 ("gluten"). According to Roar Bökset, a Swedish historian of Chinese characters, the latter technique has existed since before the Common Era.[49]

Characters may be misspelled by accident, but also consciously, either by simplifying characters for poorly-educated individuals or to speed up the writing process. Talking to Wang Weidong revealed that he simplifies characters intentionally and that he is able to write complex characters instantly upon request.

In summary, taking orders does not only involve resorting to an age-old technique of simplifying characters. It also means ensuring that order slips are written using a particular time-saving system, which can be understood at a glance even by the illiterate older women. Moreover, taking orders does not only require writing and reading skills, but also skills in memorising, calculating and communicating in standard Chinese.

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[49] Roar Bökset, *Long Story of Short Forms: The Evolution of Simplified Chinese Characters* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2006), 179.

C. Cooking Mala tang: An Interplay of Hand and Head

Cooking *mala tang* requires a whole range of well-coordinated skills. These include the interplay of mental and physical skills and competence at these skills is also reflected in the family division of labour.

All the family members know how to cook *mala tang*. However, not everyone is a good cook because, as well as manual skills, mastery lays in the accompanying intellectual abilities. Out of all the women, i.e. the group designated as cooks, the boss's sister Wu Jianhua is the best cook, so she is left in charge of cooking during busy times.

In order to cook *mala tang* time efficiently, four nets are hung into the broth in a big pot. One net contains the mix of spices. Three nets allow *mala tang* to be cooked for three individual customers simultaneously, without mixing up their choices. These nets are always filled in a specific order (1, 2, 3) reflecting the customers' arrival times (see Figure 1). This order facilitates the memorising process during cooking.

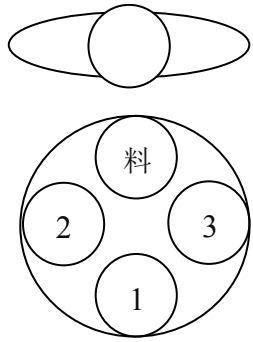

Figure 1 Cook and pot with four nets

When beginning to cook, Wu Jianhua inspects a customer's basket, mentally ordering the skewers according to their cooking time. She uses her fingers to disassemble the skewers, and to place the loose soup add-ins into a net in the bubbling broth. Wu Jianhua has learned to keep just the right distance, allowing her to place the add-ins quickly and precisely into the right net without scalding herself. She uses a long ladle to press the add-ins into the broth, to control the cooking time, and to add broth on top of a bowl.

Memorising is a central skill in cooking *mala tang*. The cook needs to remember a range of information: which skewers belong to which customer, the order of customers' arrival, the cooking times of the individual add-ins, as well as the varying cooking time according to the total quantity of add-ins. While adding ingredients into the broth, Wu Jianhua calculates the price and memorises each price in connection with the right customer. She is able to store this information even until customers return to pay after eating their meals. Moreover, special requests need to be memorised, such as the desired degree of spiciness and whether vinegar, chillies, Sichuan pepper, starch noodles or soybeans were added.

Wu Jianhua acquired these memorising skills without ever attending school. However, her former job as a street vendor provided a good basis for her fast arithmetic skills. Her expertise is admired by family members and apprentices, who describe her as intelligent, quick in her movements, and fast in cooking and calculating ("*ta tang de kuai, suanfa kuai* 她烫得

快，算法快").[50]

Apart from "hand" and "head," many different sensual skills are needed for cooking: tactile, visual, and even auditory – as a good ear is needed to understand customers and to concentrate in the mix of voices and street noises. From the customer's viewpoint, the quality of the product is evaluated on a gustatory and olfactory basis.

D. Delivering *Mala tang*: Saving Time and Energy

For delivering *mala tang*, physical, intellectual and conceptual skills, as well as social skills are needed.

As mentioned above, making deliveries requires being able to read addresses. Li Cuiping, who is not good at this, reports that initially she had to orientate herself by asking people for directions. Slowly, she familiarised herself with the local environment and, enhancing her social skills, she became acquainted with people such as the hospital elevator attendant who would then wait for her instead of making her wait.[51] Delivery also includes not being afraid of traffic and being either a good walker or able to ride a bike or motorcycle. Here too, quick performance is imperative, because customers dislike *mala tang* cooled down. Furthermore, when carrying numerous bowls at once, those delivering them need to know the routes well in order to make an efficient journey and save time and energy.

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[50] Wang Weidong, 2008/3/25 (FN, 389); Li Cuiping, 2007/10/17 (FN, 209); female apprentice, 2008/10/24 (FN, 396).

[51] Li Cuiping, 2007/12/20, (FN, 295), 2008/2/27 (FN, 363).

One difficulty is connected to the varying delivery times. Deliveries in groups to save time and labour force make it difficult to give customers an exact delivery time. When the deliverer finally reaches their destination, the customer might not be waiting downstairs or buildings refuse entry. Since not all family members possess, or are able to use, mobile phones, the deliverers usually tell family members in the shop when they are leaving and when they should call the customer from the shop phone.

If family members in the shop forget to contact the customer, various strategies are needed, such as shouting "*mala tang*" in front of the building, borrowing a mobile phone from a passer-by, or asking a person entering the building to contact the person.

These strategies may count as social skills, and Wang Weidong is especially skilled in this field. He is also talented at keeping good relationships with clients, and sometimes the family sends him out on a delivery in order to please customers and ensure they will return.

E. Producing the Mix of Spices (*Diliao*): The Secret of the Trade

A final activity that requires special skills is the production of the mix of spices at the basis of the broth (*diliao*; see 2 above). *Mala tang*'s spicy taste and aromatic perfume depend on this mix of spices. While soup add-ins may vary, the broth entails fixed rules and traditional recipes.

The production of this mix of spices is a trade secret. When conducting research, only the boss, Mr. Wu, knew the secret and he was reluctant to share it. Normally, this knowledge is transmitted to male

relatives, preferably of the same patrilineage. During the research period, five male relatives and fellow villagers studied *mala tang* production under Mr. Wu. Some of them brought their wives, who practiced making skewers and cooking *mala tang*.

Nevertheless, there are some exceptions, for instance when the knowledge was transmitted to affinal relatives of Mr. Wu's wife. Moreover, the knowledge was sold to outsiders. They had to pay between 1000 (if mainland Chinese) and 2000 Yuan RMB (if overseas Chinese), which may represent up to one quarter or one half of the entire family's total monthly income. The incentive for selling this knowledge was doubtless financial, however, Mr. Wu's daughter also expressed concerns about the growing number of competitors.

F. Learning the Trade: The Transmission of Skills

The *mala tang* production skills listed above may be learned. Learning, practicing and selectively transmitting these skills is an essential part of the restaurant owners' everyday strategies.

If you enter the key words "麻辣燙作法" ("way of preparing *mala tang*") into an internet search engine, numerous *mala tang* recipes appear alongside explanations about the meal based on an instant mix of spices.[52] It seems clear, however, that it is impossible to learn the correct preparation from these recipes alone. This is confirmed by another set of

[52] E.g. Xin Shipu 心食譜,"麻辣燙," http://www.xinshipu.com/麻辣燙-59840.htm (accessed on 2015/5/11).

websites where experienced restaurant owners offer to share their expertise, at a price, in personal training sessions.[53]

This hints at the centrality of the social environment for successful enskilment, an aspect that was also observed in the restaurant studied. Just like other learning processes, it involves the "gradual attunement of movement and perception."[54] In learning how to cook *mala tang*, by observing the master and the pot, one's own movements slowly become attuned to the craft.

Importantly, learning processes have both a social and a technical side. On the social side, this may initially include practicing the discipline or internalising community values. At a later stage, it often means positioning oneself in a social hierarchy and gaining a certain status through achieving competence, or even internalising a new world view and social order.[55]

In an informal apprenticeship lasting only several weeks or months in the *mala tang* shop, the social aspect is not so influential. Nevertheless, learning also has a technical and a social side. The apprentices have to practice making skewers over and over again, for longer than they wish to. They begin cooking *mala tang* in one net and for one person only, until

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[53] E.g. Sunbus, "四川麻辣燙創業項目介紹"(2013), http://www.sunbus001.com/tra_mlt/ (accessed on 2015/5/11).

[54] Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 357.

[55] See e.g. Michael W. Coy, ed., *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); Trevor H. J. Marchand, ed., *Making Knowledge: Explorations of the Indissoluble Relation Between Mind, Body and Environment, JRAI* Special Issue (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

they are able to build up to several nets and customers at the same time. This includes practicing patience and discipline, and accepting a subordinate position with regard to the master and the overall hierarchy in the workplace.

Concerning the technical side and internalisation of skills, it is interesting that a female apprentice describes Wu Jianhua's cooking movements as *hen ling* 很靈 (here "skilful," "quick").[56] While the apprentice is still afraid of the hot bubbles in the pot, Wu Jianhua has learned to not fear them, moving quickly and precisely instead. She no longer needs to think about the exact distance between her hands and the broth, because her *mala tang* cooking skills have become embodied within her know-how.

Recently, this "embodiment" of knowledge has been stressed in so many studies[57] that Ingold[58] even refers to it as an anthropological cliché. The reason for highlighting this proliferation may be connected to a misunderstanding of what embodied knowledge is.[59] In aiming to convey a better understanding of skill, Ingold discusses the coupling of perception

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[56] Female apprentice, 24/10/2008 (FN, 396).

[57] E.g. Charles M. Keller and Janet Dixon Keller, *Cognition*; Kurt Beck and Gerd Spittler, ed., *Arbeit in Afrika* (Hamburg: Lit, 1996); Erin O'Connor, "Embodied Knowledge: The Experience of Meaning and the Struggle Towards Proficiency in Glassblowing," *Ethnography* 6 (2005): 183-204; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[58] Tim Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): 122.

[59] Tim Ingold, "Walking the Plank: Meditations on a Process of Skill," in *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an Epistemological Framework*, edited by John R. Dakers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 65-80.

and action. He remarks that there is a common misapprehension that repeated physical training causes "a progressive loss of conscious awareness or concentration in the task" and that handling tools becomes "automatic."[60] Instead, Ingold argues that in skilled practice there is indeed awareness, because it is responsive to environmental conditions that change continuously. However, this "is not the awareness of a mind that holds itself aloof from the messy, hands-on business of work. It is rather immanent in practical, perceptual activity, reaching out into its surroundings along multiple pathways of sensory participation."[61]

To further understand the enskilment of a *mala tang* cook, it is useful to adopt French technology anthropologist François Sigaut's differentiation between "knowledge" and "skill."[62] For Sigaut, "(i)t is not sufficient to know how a car is driven or a piano played if one is actually to be able to drive a car or play the piano. Turning knowledge into skills takes a learning period (…)."[63] Sigaut calls this process "the fading of knowledge in the process of (…) embodying or incorporating it."[64] Moreover, he uses the expressions "automatic," "forgotten" and "internalised" to describe what happens to knowledge in this process. Nevertheless, he does not seem to refer to a knowledge that has actually been forgotten or become automatic, but rather to the type of knowledge

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60 *Ibid.*, 77.

61 *Ibid.*, 77.

62 François Sigaut, "Technology," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 420-59.

63 *Ibid.*, 439.

64 *Ibid.*, 438.

and integral awareness above mentioned by Ingold:[65] an awareness that is inherent in activity, and that requires many responsive senses, instead of conscious thought. For Sigaut, this type of embodied knowledge or skill is at the basis of "effective action, and thus of techniques" and it is "embodied in the very process of action."[66]

It is in this sense that knowledge about cooking *mala tang* becomes internalised, becomes a skill – and it is in this sense that skill is frequently overlooked.

Ⅴ. Skill as a Perspective for Research on (Food and) Migration?

The literature review of the anthropological study of food and migration revealed that most studies focus exclusively on transnational migration. Moreover, although there are some studies of Chinese people overseas, there is a lack of research into regional migration within China. Finally, although a lot of migrants work in the catering sector, few studies actually focus on the nature of the work and on the skills needed to do this work. Skill is generally mentioned rather marginally, if at all.

In order to demonstrate the role that food-related skills may play in migrants' working lives, an ethnographic case study on the working life of a rural Chinese migrant family running a *mala tang* restaurant in urban

[65] Tim Ingold, "Walking the Plank: Meditations on a Process of Skill."
[66] François Sigaut, "Technology," 438-9.

Shanghai was provided. The skills required for five basic activities in the *mala tang* restaurant were described and analysed in detail (making skewers, taking orders, cooking *mala tang*, delivering *mala tang*, and preparing the mix of spices).

It became clear that particular skills are needed for each of these activities. Cooking *mala tang*, for example, entails a precise combination of mental and bodily skills. It requires fast mental arithmetic skills and memorising complex information, especially during busy periods, such as specific customer orders, an overview of the whole cooking process, cooking times of the individual ingredients, prices and which bills have been paid. Moreover, skilled *mala tang* cooking requires experienced and quick movements and embodied knowledge in handling the scalding broth.

In general, skills required for *mala tang* production range from intellectual skills such as literacy and arithmetic, to the memorising skills needed for recording orders and for cooking *mala tang*. They involve social skills, to ensure efficient organisation in the work place customer retention and negotiations. They require bodily skills, such as using hands and specific cooking utensils, but also concerning the patience and endurance needed for some of the tasks, like making skewers or walking great distances for deliveries. In addition, the use of different senses is required. The most obvious of these is the visual sense, which is needed to make aesthetically appealing skewers and to control the cooking process. It is worth noting however, that auditory, gustatory and olfactory skills may also play a role in marketing *mala tang* successfully. Cognitive skills are essential too, in order to create mental maps for efficient delivery

routes.

Overall, these skills are indispensable for making efficient use of scarce resources: labour, finances, available working space, and time.

The reason that the skills of migrants are generally ignored, in other disciplines as well as anthropology, may be due to the missing tangibility of skill. However, this paper has shown that it is highly beneficial to look at migration, as well as food and migration, through the lens of skill for several reasons.

Firstly, a focus on skills contributes to an understanding of the agency and competences of migrants, acknowledging their creativity and potential. With regard to coping with a new environment, a focus on the role of skilled food production rather than on food consumption may reveal a different, maybe more strategic and conscious aspect, of migrant agency.

Secondly, identity is not only constituted by the type of food consumed, but also by the type of food that is skilfully produced. The possession of particular skills and knowledge usually influences the way that practitioners perceive themselves and demarcate others. Therefore, a focus on skill may also enlighten us about different facets of migrant identity – a topic so prevalent in the literature on food and migration.

Thirdly, guided by a focus on skill, several interesting insights emerge around the fact that *mala tang* is a Sichuan dish prepared by Anhui migrants for their host society in Shanghai. On the one hand, this may reveal a great deal about how Anhui migrants are perceived by the host society, as well as about the particular relationship between migrants and

hosts, producers and consumers. Moreover, it again highlights the agency of migrants, who actively position themselves within the host society and the culinary landscape in Shanghai through their skills. On the other hand, questions of authenticity, continuity and discontinuity gain a new dynamic, when Anhui migrants produce a new and hybrid "authentic" Sichuan dish in public, but continue to consume their original local food in private.

The empirical findings in this article reveal that viewing these migrants through the lens of skill may enhance our knowledge of how food-related skills structure and organise the migratory process and the everyday working life of migrants, at least with regard to three aspects.

Firstly, for the *mala tang* restaurateurs, skills are an important form of capital, and the possession of this capital structures the overall migration process. A look at the history of the family members studied shows that they have gained special knowledge and skills over many years. This knowledge does not only present an optimal basis for their work in the *mala tang* restaurant, but in general it helps them to master the migration process and to survive in an unknown city. Hence, skills may be understood as an important resource in the migration process. Along with the well-studied aspects of economic and social capital, skills are an important part of the capital volume of migrants. For the *mala tang* restaurateurs, this capital is also decisive for occupational choices. Taking migrant skills as a point of departure provides important insights into the actions and motivations of migrants. It helps explain why migrants occupy certain occupational niches or why they prefer to collaborate with their fellow villagers.

Secondly, there is a close link between migrants' skills and the organisation of their working and everyday lives. A look at the allocation of labour in the *mala tang* restaurant reveals that skills are significant for organising the family's everyday life and work. Skills not only determine the ideal number of people who should work in a restaurant, their working hours and income, but they also influence the allocation and evaluation of the different tasks, and thus the greater context of everyday life in the city, such as social contacts, standing, and self-perception. Accordingly, we may presume that skills comprise an important organisational factor in other sectors outside the *mala tang* profession. This form of social organisation progresses the discourse beyond the usual focus of migration studies on family, village and ethnic networks.

Thirdly, skills may play an important role in negotiation processes of hierarchies of knowledge transmission. On the one hand, skill may help explain social changes accompanying the migration process, for example, regarding the negotiation of gender roles. On the other hand, the way that specific knowledge is distributed according to social norms also influences the organisation of the group.

In the *mala tang* restaurant, family members have different skills and they undertake different tasks according to their skills. Here, gender is an important structuring factor, not only with regard to the individuals' skills, but also concerning the allocation of tasks that are perceived as gender-appropriate in traditional Han-Chinese society. In the restaurant, women usually undertake tasks that require dexterity and nimble fingers, whereas men commonly perform heavier tasks outside of the restaurant.

Nevertheless, these differences are not clear-cut and they are subject to conflicts, which is also due to the immanent hierarchy of knowledge distribution. When looking at the way that certain knowledge is controlled and by whom, it becomes clear that the boss, Mr. Wu, controls the knowledge about the mix of spices. He is the oldest man in the study group, with the highest family status. In a patrilineal system, this type of secret knowledge is generally shared with male members from the same line of descent. Contradictions arise, though, when this knowledge is sold to outsiders or when, in 2010, Mr. Wu's sister opened her own *mala tang* restaurant and did finally acquire the necessary knowledge about the mix of spices.

In conclusion, this contribution has shown the high value of looking at migration through the lens of skill. This seems especially true for the topic of food production, in the case of China at least. A closer look at food skills helps to explain numerous facets of food and migration, ranging from questions of agency, identity, continuity, authenticity and relationship to the host society. This perspective also enhances an understanding of migrants' motivations, the ways that they organise their migration processes and everyday lives within these processes, and the overall dynamic of the migration processes. Finally, it also contributes to acknowledging important migrant skills that may not be obvious at first sight. This may lead us to share the appreciation of Wu Jianhua's skills in *mala tang* cooking, "*ta tang de kuai, suanfa kuai* 她烫得快，算法快" ("she is fast in cooking [*mala tang*] and in calculating").

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Appendix

Table 1. Meat and seafood skewers (*hun lei* 葷類), and noodles.

No	Chinese name	pinyin	English translation
1.	鮮鮮腸	*xiānxiān cháng*	Thin, salami
2.	開花腸	*kāihuā cháng*	Sausage with flower shaped endings
3.	雞肉腸	*jīròu cháng*	Chicken sausage
4.	火腿腸	*huǒtuǐ cháng*	Ham sausage
5.	蟹肉棒	*xièròu bàng*	Crab meat stick
6.	香菇腸	*xiānggū cháng*	Shiitake sausage
7.	金菇腸	*jīngū cháng*	Sausage with type of mushroom
8.	黃金菇	*huángjīn gū*	"Golden mushroom" (*Pleurotus citrinopileatus sing.*)
9.	包心丸	*bāoxīn wán*	Cabbage pork balls
10.	龍蝦球	*lóngxiā qiú*	Lobster balls
11.	魚竹輪	*yúzhú lún*	Type of fish balls
12.	魚豆腐	*yú dòufu*	Fish tofu
13.	鮑魚片	*bàoyú piàn*	Abalone slices
14.	金針菇	*jnzhēn gū*	"Golden needle mushroom" (*Flammulina velutipes*)
15.	木魚丸 (sic.)	*mùyú wán*	Squid balls
16.	黃金餃	*huáng jīn jiǎo*	Golden dumplings
17.	北極翅	*běijí chì*	"North pole wings" (fried pieces of fish in wing shape)
18.	鵪鶉蛋	*ānchún dàn*	Quail eggs
19.	香港仔	*Xiānggǎng zǎi*	Yellow coin shaped sea food
20.	日本豆腐	*rìběn dòufu*	Japanese tofu (soft tofu in plastic coating)
21.	蝦米餃	*xiāmi jiǎo*	Dumplings with small shrimps filling
22.	燕餃	*Yān jiǎo*	Hebei dumplings
23.	貢丸	*gòngwán*	Type of fish balls
24.	魚丸	*yúwán*	Type of fish balls
25.	魚板	*yúbǎn*	Hard, dry slice of fish
26.	鹹肉	*xiánròu*	Bacon, salted meat
27.	肉皮	*ròupí*	Pork skin
28.	牛肉	*niúròu*	Beef
29.	鸡肫	*jīzhūn*	Chicken stomach
30.	香腸	*xiāngcháng*	Sausage
31.	紅腸	*hóngcháng*	Red-skinned sausage, hot dog
32.	方腸	*fāngcháng*	Squared sausage
33.	燒賣	*shāomai*	Shaomai (steamed dumplings filled with rice and other ingredients with dough gathered at the top)
34.	骨肉	*gǔròu*	Meat with bones
35.	結腸	*jiécháng*	Type of sausage
36.	親腸	*qincháng*	Type of sausage
37.	米粉	*mǐfěn*	Rice-flour noodles
38.	寬麵	*kuān miàn*	Broad wheat-flour noodles

39.	細麵	*xì miàn*	Thin wheat-flour noodles
40.	麵條	*miàntiáo*	(Wheat-flour) noodles
41.	粉絲	*fěnsī*	Thin bean or sweet potato starch noodles
42.	方便麵	*fāngbiàn miàn*	Instant noodles

Table 2. Vegetarian skewers (*su lei* 素類).

No.	Chinese name	pinyin	English translation
1.	油豆腐	*yóu dòufu*	Fried, square-shaped tofu
2.	豆腐衣	*dòufu yī*	Dried beancurd skin
3.	腐竹	*fǔzhú*	Dried beancurd sticks
4.	百葉結	*bǎiyè jié*	Pressed, dry, knot-shaped tofu (thin)
5.	厚百葉	*hòu bǎiyè*	Pressed, dry, knot-shaped tofu (thick)
6.	素火腿	*sù huǒtuǐ*	Vegetarian ham, made out of beans
7.	海帶結	*hǎidài jié*	Knotted seaweed (*Laminaria japonica*)
8.	海帶絲	*hǎidài sī*	Seaweed cut in stripes (*Laminaria japonica*)
9.	卷心菜	*juǎnxīn cài*	Cabbage (*Brassica oleracea L.*)
10.	小白菜	*xiǎo báicài*	Pakchoi (*Brassica chinensis*)
11.	蓬蒿菜	*pénghāo cài*	Crowndaisy chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum coronarium*)
12.	空心菜	*kōngxīn cài*	Water spinach (*Ipomoea aquatica*)
13.	黃花菜	*huánghuā cài*	Day lily (*Hemerocallis fulva*)
14.	紫角葉	*zǐjiǎo yè*	Type of leafy vegetable (*Basella rubra*)
15.	蘭花干	*lánhuāgān*	Spongy thick slice of tofu with cuts
16.	麵筋	*yóu miànjīn*	Fried gluten balls
17.	花菜	*huācài*	Cauliflower
18.	生菜	*shēngcài*	Type of lettuce
19.	菠菜	*bōcài*	Spinach
20.	青菜	*qīngcài*	Green vegetables
21.	白菜	*báicài*	Type of Chinese cabbage (*Brassica pekinensis*)
22.	干絲	*gānsī*	Pressed tofu, cut in stripes
23.	木耳	*mù'ěr*	Muer mushroom (*Auricularia auricula*)
24.	香菇	*xiānggū*	Shiitake mushroom (*Lentinula edodes*)
25.	平菇	*pínggū*	Oyster mushroom (*Pleurotus ostreatus*)
26.	冬瓜	*dōngguā*	Wax gourd (*Benincasa hispida*)
27.	冬笋	*dōngsǔn*	Winter bamboo shoots
28.	年糕	*niángāo*	New Year cake (made of glutinous rice flour)
29.	土豆	*tǔdòu*	Potato slices
30.	豆芽	*dòuyá*	Bean sprouts

Table 3. Simplified schedule of a 24-hour working day in the restaurant studied.

Time	Tasks	Person
7am		
	- getting up; lighting the coal fire, boiling water and the previously prepared meat broth; filling up the thermos flasks	Li Cuiping (LCP)
	- washing the face, brushing teeth, combing hair, dressing up for work, including apron and sleeve guards	
	- preparing breakfast**:** rice porridge with pickles	
	- receiving the tofu and rice cake suppliers	
	- washing, cutting, bundling, the vegetable and soy bean products, making skewers	
8am		
	- cutting cauliflower and making cauliflower and mushroom skewers bundling the leafy vegetables	Wang Weidong (WWD)
	- receiving the meat supplier	
after 9am		
	- thawing the frozen meat and fish in front of the ventilator and making skewers	
	- filling up the fridge with skewers and storing the remaining skewers in polystyrene boxes	
10am		
	arrival of an retired fellow villager who helps preparing the easy skewers (gluten balls and rice cake)	WWD, fellow villager
	- break with cigarettes and tea; exchange of news	
	- sometimes: buying deep-fried twisted dough sticks breakfast with porridge	LCP, WWD
10.30		
	- taking out the phone and the cash from the storage room	WWD
	- carrying the pot with the hot meat broth to the front, ladling the broth into a pot on the gas flame, adding the spices and sieves	WWD LCP
	- opening the restaurant to the public	WWP
	- carrying back the pot with chunks of meat, filling it up with water, heating it up	LCP
	- taking telephone orders	WWD

Time	Tasks	Person
after 11am		
	- getting up, personal hygiene, dressing up	Wu Jianhua
	- cooking *mala tang*	(WJH)
	- assisting the cook: placing the baskets in rows, taking the ready bowls, preparing bowls for delivery, removing the trash	Wu Guilan,
	- serving, taking the money, clearing the tables, washing dishes	WGL)
	- delivery by foot	LCP
	- delivery by moped	WWD
11.30am–1.30pm (peak time)		
	- getting up	WGL
	- assisting the cook	
	- taking orders on the phone, assembling the orders	WGL,WWD
	- serving, taking money, clearing, washing dishes, carrying the empty bowls in front, removing the trash	WGL
2pm		
	- getting up, personal hygiene, dressing up	Wu Jianguo (WJG)
	- preparing lunch: rice, fried vegetables, fried groundnuts/tofu/egg/meat/ dried fish	LCP
	- Sometimes: buying additional ingredients on the nearby market; Washing the used wooden skewers	WJH
3–4pm		
	- eating lunch, which is breakfast for WJH, WJG, WGL	all
	- washing dishes	LCP
	- watching TV	WJH (WGL)
	- taking a nap, chatting with the neighbours	WWD
	- often: receiving a nearby couple of retired fellow villagers	
	- sometimes: taking a shower in the neighbour's flat	
after 4pm		
	- sweeping, clearing the tables, overviewing the situation, changing the pots with the meat broth	WJG
	- refilling the pot with the *mala tang* broth	LCP, WGL (all)
	- making skewers, filling up the shelves with skewers	WJG, LCP
	- going for delivery by foot and moped	LCP, WWD
	- cooking *mala tang*, taking the money, cleaning	WGL (LCP)
	- taking orders on the phone (all tasks repeated until late night)	WGL,

5.30–6.30pm (peak time)	
- cooking *mala tang* with the help of assistants	WJH
8 or 9pm	
- cutting the vegetables, cooking the rice for dinner/lunch	LCP
- cooking dinner/lunch	WJG
- dinner/lunch: rice, fried vegetables, fried groundnuts/tofu/egg/meat/ dried fish	all
- driving to the wholesale vegetable market	WJG
9 or 10pm	
- washing dishes	LCP
- washing clothes	LCP, WWD
after 11pm	
- returning from the market, washing and storing the fresh food	WJG
- taking orders on the phone	WGL/WWD
- delivery	all
- cooking *mala tang*, serving, cleaning up, cashing up	women
12pm/1am	
- personal hygiene in the storage room, going to bed	LCP, WWD
3am	
- closing the restaurant to the public	WJG
after 3am	
- preparing, tidying and sweeping the restaurant	WGL, WJH,
- preparing the mix of spices and the meat broth	WJG
- late night meal: instant noodles or *mala tang*	WGL, WJH,
- personal hygiene in the storage room	WJG
after 4am	
- going to bed	WJH
5/6am	
- going to bed	WGL, WJG